DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 203 528 EA 013 720

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TITLE Who Stays? Who Leaves? An Examination of Sex Differences in Staying and Leaving.
PUB DATE Apr 81
NOTE 17p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Los Angeles, CA, April 13-17, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Ability: *Adolescents: *Discriminant Analysis: Dropout Research: *Dropouts: *Factor Analysis: Family Influence: Foreign Countries: Longitudinal Studies: Outcomes of Education: Secondary Education: *Sex Differences: Socioeconomic Status: *Student Attitudes: Student Characteristics
IDENTIFIERS *Australia (Melbourne)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the major determinants of the "staying" and "leaving" process for samples of Melbourne (Australia) male and female adolescents. Sixty attitudinal statements were obtained from 796 adolescents and factor analysed. The subset of independent variables, together with a set of personality and ability measures, was used to predict staying or leaving status. Discriminant analysis was undertaken, with "leaving" status and sex as the dependent variable, using a stepwise method. Two significant functions were identified, the first suggesting a sex-dimension, the second a stayer-leaver dimension. In the present study, female adolescents achieved good grades and tended to be conforming and more influenced by teachers. Males were more extroverted, self-interested, fatalistic, more likely to rate their chances of success highly, and less conventional and conforming in their attitudes to school. Early leavers generally were not academically motivated, lacked organizational skills, came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, had poor verbal ability, and rarely discussed future job plans with parents. Stayers were characterized by high motivational ability and organizational skills, higher socioeconomic status, and supportive families. (Author/MLF)

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Who Stays? Who Leaves?

An Examination of Sex Differences in Staying and Leaving

by

Millicent E. Poole and B.C. Low

Why do some students leave school early while others stay on longer? Is it a question of personal choice or has the school, in a sorting and selecting process, culled them out? Studies on the staying and leaving processes are not new and indeed have engaged the interest of researchers consistently for over two decades (e.g., see bibliographies by Tesseneer & Tesseneer, 1958; Miller, Saleem & Bryce, 1965; NEA, 1967; Radford & Wilkes, 1975). The literature suggests a number of dimensions which consistently differentiate 'stayers' and 'leavers' - home background and ability characteristics, attitudes to and experiences at school, and aspects of personality.

Variables which have been explored among the home background factors include socio-economic status and family intactness. Most studies have shown that early leavers (male and female) are from lower socio-economic status families (Halsey & Gardner, 1953; Bachman, Green & Wirtanen, 1976), where parental educational levels are lower (Williams, 1963; Duncan, 1965), and where there is lack of home security and encouragement, both psychological and financial (Lichter, Rapien, Seibert & Sklansky, 1962; Scales, 1969; The Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education, England, 1959.)

As to intellectual abilities, there is less agreement among researchers. While some studies have associated lower intelligence and academic ability with early leaving (e.g., Cook, 1956; Warner, 1964; Reiss & Rhodes, 1959; Bachman et al, 1976), other studies have located intellectually capable dropouts (Elliott, Voss & Wendling, 1966) and identified talent and class wastage within the opportunity structure for males and females (Jackson & Marsden, 1962; Douglas, 1964; the Robbins Report, 1963; Radford & Wilkes, 1975). This diversity of opinion suggests the possibility that processes from within the school and/or the home may interact with ability levels and that there may well be a cluster of variables which distinguish 'stayers' and 'leavers'.

Students' experiences of secondary schooling are documented as contributing to early leaving. On the whole, the school impressions of early leavers tend to be less favourable than those of the stayers: curriculum is seen as irrelevant, school as boring, discipline as restrictive (e.g., Ahlstrom & Havighurst, 1971; Birmingham Educational Development Project, 1971; Poole & Simkin, 1976; Knight, 1977; Behrens, 1978); teachers are seen as not giving sufficient attention or support and as having negative attitudes (Richter & Scandrette, 1971; Hunt & Clawson, 1975; Poole & Simkin, 1976; Ozolins, 1974; Connell et al, 1975); the early leavers themselves develop negative attitudes towards schools (Tinney et al, 1974; ACTU, 1975; Knight, 1977; Poole & Simkin, 1976; Poole, 1978); and there is often a mismatch between some individuals and the typical school environment (Backman, 1972; Tseng, 1972; Thornburg, 1975).

Whether these school related variables operate differently for male and female early leavers has not, however, generally been a focus of such research. Could it be, for example, that different family socialisation processes for males and females, and different processes of instruction and control operating within the school for boys and girls, lead to different attitude profiles to school for early male and early female leavers? Likewise, the question arises as to whether the stayers (male and female) are equally socialised into the school environment in terms of commitment to, say, achievement values, conformity patterns, and other school values.

Of the various personality dimensions that early leavers have been reported as exhibiting, the most significant appear to be: low levels of achievement motivation (Barker, 1952; Chilman, 1959; Swift, 1966); poor self-esteem (Namenwirth, 1969; Bachman et al, 1976); lack of emotional stability (Richter & Scandrette, 1971), less initiative, reliability and extroversion (Hallworth, 1961; Richter & Scandrette, 1971). The psychology of sex difference literature suggests that girls have lower levels of self-esteem and are less likely to be extroverted or attention seeking (see, for example, Maccoby & Jacklin, 1975). Such personality variables have only occasionally, however, been looked at in conjunction with family and schooling variables and an individual's own value system (e.g., the Youth in Transition Study, Bachman et al, 1976) to explain the staying or leaving process for males or females. Could it be, for example, that female early leavers are especially disadvantaged by a combination of socialisation factors associated with self and schooling?

Studies on 'value climates' have pointed to complex interactions between family background, ability, personality and values as also being important in deciding who stays on at school and who succeeds (e.g., Swift, 1966; Brookover et al, 1964; Rosier, 1978). It seems that, when schooling is valued either for intellectual goals or instrumental goals (getting on, getting a good job, planning for one's future), there is less likelihood of early leaving. How such variables interrelate is largely unresearched. In addition, little is known about whether these variables operate differently for males and females.

Furthermore, although numerous studies of school leavers have been undertaken, few have been multivariate in approach. Even fewer have considered major combinations of predictors of staying and leaving together, especially for sex differentiated samples. The purpose of the present study, therefore, within a context of continuing concern for equality of educational opportunity was to examine the major determinants of the staying and leaving process for samples of male and female adolescents. The key concern was to identify the combined contribution of home background, school experiences and personal ability and attitudinal factors for male and female leavers and stayers, with a view to determining whether the patterning of influences is the same or different for male and female adolescents.

Sample

Subjects were selected by a three-stage sampling procedure. The first stage defined the population to be sampled as all students born in 1958 attending Melbourne Metropolitan secondary schools teaching more than thirty students born in that year. The 295 schools meeting these criteria were then stratified according to the sex composition of students and a socio-economic ranking of the location (Lancaster-Jones, 1968). A subsample of 10 per cent was chosen from this stratified sample, this being a proportion manageable in practical terms and yet sufficient in size to permit the application of multivariate procedures. The second stage of sampling involved selecting twenty-five students at random from each of the schools. The total number of students included in the second stage of the sampling was 796. This student sampling represented approximately 18 per cent of all fourteen-year olds enrolled in 1972 in the multi-track system of state-financed schools (high schools and technical schools) and independent fee-paying schools (Roman Catholic and non-Catholic schools including Protestant and non-denominational and non-religious private schools). The third sampling phase, to identify stayers and leavers, involved a process of consultation with the schools and students during the period under investigation to determine who stayed on and who left.

Students who left school before their 17th year were classified as 'leavers' for the purposes of this study. They were placed into four categories depending on their 'leaving' status and their sex, this variable being given the code name LVSEX. The numbers of students in each category of the sample are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1:

Group No.	Identification	Number of students.
1	Male leavers	217
2	Female leavers	245
3	Male stayers	179
4	Female stayers	155
	Total	796

Instruments

Standard tests and inventories were used to obtain measures in a number of areas - intellectual, attitudinal, vocational and personality.

The standard tests included:

The Junior Eysenck Personality Inventory: A scale to measure extroversion/introversion (JEPIE) and neuroticism or emotionality (JEPNS) in students 7-16 years of age; test/re-test reliability of +0.7 and +0.8 (Eysenck, 1965).

The Aberdeen Academic Motivation Inventory (AAM): A 24 item-scale designed by Entwisle (1972) to measure attitudes to school, aspirations, work habits and the determination to do well at school work; test/re-test reliability +0.81.

The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (CSE): A 58 item subjective rating scale of self-esteem, with a test/re-test reliability of 0.88 (Coopersmith, 1967).

Abilities: The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) Higher Test M was used as a measure of intellectual ability. There are two sections, linguistic, L (VAB) and numerical or quantitative, Q (MAB), with a split-half reliability co-efficient of .85 (L) and .83 (Q). (ACER, n.d.).

Twelve of the independent variables were derived from questionnaire items, using largely Likert-type scales:

1. Valuation of ambition (Good or bad)
2. Importance of getting ahead (Very important to definitely not important)
3. Self-rating of success changes (Excellent to no chance)
4. Frequency of job discussion with parents (Frequently to never)
5. Importance of post-school discussions with parents (Very important to not important).
6. Self-estimated academic ability (Top 20% to bottom 20%)
7. Job advice from teachers (Several sessions to none)
8. Extent of scholastic failure (One subject to whole year)
9. Language spoken in the home (English vs not English)
10. School type - technical, high, independent
11. Overall grade in 1972
12. Social class (obtained by combining the categories on the Lancaster-Jones Scale for father's occupation and father's education, and then forming 3 categories of social class - low, middle, upper).

The third set of variables were derived from a large number of statements about aspects of school, parents, peers and value orientation. Sample items included statements on schooling and values such as 'School fosters independence', 'Most important thing about school is making friends', 'Planning only makes a person unhappy since plans rarely work out', 'It is best to be like everyone else and not stand out from the crowd'. Statements on teachers and school were of the type 'Teachers are good at getting their ideas across in the classroom', 'We should be able to undertake community service and development projects as part of our school work', to 'I get bored and fed up with school and do not really enjoy anything connected with it'. Full details of the questionnaire can be found in Poole (1978).

Testing Procedure:

The data were collected by a team of researchers engaged in the La Trobe 15-18 Year Old Project. For the standard tests, standardized administration procedures were used. The questionnaire format was basically closed and full response categories were used in order to form the basis of a Likert-type scale. The tests and questionnaire were group administered, with identical and rehearsed procedures being used by the team members, all of whom were experienced in social survey research. School personnel were not involved in test administration.

The order of testing was varied to guard against systematic order effects biasing the data.

Results

Sixty attitude statements about aspects of school, parents, peers, teachers and value orientations were factor analysed to obtain a smaller set of underlying factors. The method of factor analysis was the principal components method with a varimax rotation. Fifteen factors, accounting for 49 percent of the variance, were identified and are described in Table 2. Scores were calculated for each student on each of these factors to provide a further fifteen independent variables related to attitude and value orientations. The dependent variable in the study was determined by the year at which a student left school.

TABLE 2:

Factor No.	% Variance	Factor Name	Factor Characteristics
1	5.5	Fatalism/ Pessimism	Non-commitment to planning; a fatalistic acceptance of what life brings; a conviction that life is full of vagaries; a lack of faith in schooling to alter any of this.
2	4.8	Commitment to Education (Conventional)	A conviction that education helps one's life chances e.g. in terms of career planning and avoiding a dead-end job.
3	3.4	"Preparation for Life"	A plea for relevance in education to school-work related factors, e.g. job application techniques, managing in one's job, and to future needs, e.g. job relevant subjects and information on running a home.
4	1.8	Emergent Educational Values	An interest in community projects and service, discussion methods, more interesting curricula, and using adults outside the school as resource persons.
5	1.7	Career Orientation	A belief in the need for more career education in schools (e.g. career information, advisers, visiting speakers).
6	1.4	School-oriented Values (Conventional)	A conviction that school teaches about careers, that teachers are good at getting their ideas across and that most school subjects are interesting.
7	1.3	Self-deprecation	A lack of confidence, poor self-esteem, and a general feeling of remembering one's limitations and not trying too hard.
8.	1.3	Self-interest	A philosophy of self first in the survival game at school and in life generally.

Factor No.	% Variance	Factor Name	Factor Characteristics
9.	1.2	Anti-conformity	A dislike of school regulations (e.g. concerning uniforms and form captains) and a disinterest in school subjects.
10.	1.2	Insecurity	A feeling of fear of failure and insecurity in school and in life (e.g. don't expect too much from life or you'll be disappointed); apprehension at moving into first job.
11.	1.2	Non-academic School Values	A regard for excelling at sport. School is seen as useful for making friends, and the advent of adults and parents teaching practical skills in school is welcomed.
12.	1.2	Organizational Skills	A realization that school teaches leadership and management skills and helps foster independence.
13.	1.2	Teacher Influence	A focussing on aspects of teacher behaviour in relation to teacher attitudes, assessment and discipline.
14.	1.1	Conformity in Behaviour	A realization that to get on at school it is best to behave like everyone else and not to stand out.
15.	1.1	Functional Literacy	A language factor where students say they would do better at school if their knowledge of English were better. The factor may be a "migrant" factor as the students with an English language problem believe we should learn more about the countries from which our migrants come.

Total variance accounted for 49%

A discriminant analysis was undertaken using LVSEX as the dependent variable and a set of 33 independent variables. The predictor variables included Variables 1 to 12 obtained from the questionnaire data described earlier, the fifteen variables obtained from the factor analysis, and the six variables obtained from the scores on standard tests.

The solution method used in the discriminant analysis was a stepwise solution in which the variable selected in each step maximized Rao's V, as shown in the S.P.S.S. program documentation.

Table 3 indicates the independent variables accepted in the analysis, and those which did not reach the criterion for acceptance. The order of entry of each of the variables into the analysis is also shown.

TABLE 3:

Variables in the analysis		Order of Entry	Variables not in the analysis	
Indent	Name			
11	Overall grade in 1972	1	5	Importance of post-school discussions with parents
AAM	Academic Achievement - Motivation	2	6	Self-estimated academic ability
Factor 8	Self-interest	3	8	Extent of scholastic failure
JEPNS	Eysenck JPI Introversion Score	4	JEPIE	Eysenck JPI Extroversion Score
12	Social class	5	MAB	Mathematical Ability
Factor 11	Non-academic school values	6	Factor 3	'Preparation for Life'
3	Self-rating of success chances	7	4	Emergent Educational Values
4	Frequency of job discussions with parents	8	7	Self-deprecation
Factor 13	Teacher influence	9	10	Insecurity
7	Job Advice from teachers	10	14	Conformity in Behaviour
Factor 9	Anti-conformism	11	15	Functional Literacy
Factor 12	Organizational skills	12		Did not contribute sufficiently to the explanation to get included. (small explanatory power). Statistical procedure. Variance already explained by variables already in there.
VAB	Verbal Ability	13		
Factor 2	Commitment to Education (conventional)	14		
10	School type (technical, high, independent)	15		
Factor 6	School-oriented values (conventional)	16		
9	Language spoken in the home	17		
1	Valuation of Ambition	18		
2	Importance of getting ahead	19		
CSE	Self-esteem	20		
Factor 1	Fatalism/Pessimism	21		
Factor 5	Career Orientation	22		

Two significant discriminant functions were identified, their eigenvalues and canonical correlations being shown in Table 4. The standardized discriminant function coefficients for each function are shown in Table 5, and the centroids of the four groups in discriminant space are shown in Table 6 and Figure 1.

TABLE 4:

Eigenvalues and Canonical Correlations for Significant Functions

ction	Eigenvalue	Relative percentage	Canonical Correlation
1	.27	62.1	.46
2	.13	30.4	.34

TABLE 5:

Standardized Discriminant Function Coefficients

Variable		Function 1	Function 2
1	Valuation of Ambition	.10	.03
2	Importance of getting ahead	- .16	- .06
3	Self-rating of success chances	- .21	- .08
4	Frequency of job discussions with parents	.02	.35
7	Job advice from teachers	- .06	.11
9	Language spoken in the home	- .12	.14
10	School type	.08	- .23
11	Overall grade in 1972	- .59	.16
12	Social class	.03	.42
JEPNS	Eysenck JPI Introversion Score	- .26	- .07
AAM	Academic Achievement Motivation	- .13	.45
CSE	Self-esteem	.15	.07
VAB	Verbal ABility	.06	.35
Factor 1	Fatalism/Pessimism	.19	.03
2	Commitment to Education (conventional)	.13	- .29
5	Career Orientation	- .03	.11
6	School-oriented values	- .18	- .14
8	Self-interest	.24	.07
9	Anti-conformity	.23	- .01
11	Non-academic school values	.18	.20
12	Organizational skills	- .07	.44
13	Teacher influence	.18	- .15

TABLE 6:

Centroids of groups in Reduced Space

	Function 1	Function 2
Group 1 - male leavers	.49	- .21
Group 2 - female leavers	- .42	- .35
Group 3 - male stayers	.42	.31
Group 4 - female stayers	- .51	.48

The first discriminant function appears to be related to the sex of student, separating the male groups from the female groups, while the second discriminant function discriminates between the 'leaver' and the 'stayer' groups. The graphical representation in Figure 1 indicates that the two functions together separate the four groups in discriminant space.

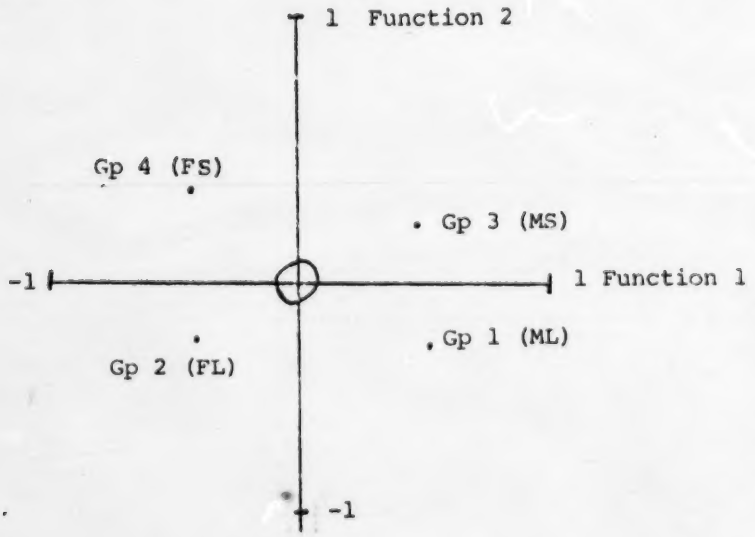

Figure 1: Group Centroids on Functions 1 and 2

On Function 1, the major variables which separate the sex groups are overall grade (-.59), introversion/extroversion (-.26), self-rated success (-.21), school-oriented values (-.18), self-interest (.24), anti-conformism (.23), fatalism/pessimism (.19), non-academic school values (.18) and teacher influence (.18). Function 1 appears to be a 'compliance with school values' function. For the present sample, female students are more likely to achieve good grades, be conforming and influenced by the teacher, while male students are more extroverted, more assured of their own success, more self-interested and fatalistic and less tapped in to conventional school values.

Function 2 separates the 'leavers' and the 'stayers'. The variables which contribute most to this pattern of discrimination are: academic achievement motivation (.45), organizational skills (.44), social class (.42), verbal ability (.35) and frequency of job discussions with parents (.35). The negative loadings came from school type (-.23), and commitment to education, conventional (-.29). Function 2 appears to combine motivational ability and organizational factors with higher SES and a supportive family context. The function suggests home-school congruence in commitment to achieve at school as a stage to successful life transition to work, viz. 'school to work goal congruency values'.

A combined profile on Functions 1 and 2, then suggests the following types of profile for each of the four criterion groups:

Female Stayers: These are likely to be students who achieve higher grades; conform to school values; are influenced by their teachers; display high academic achievement motivation; possess high organisational skills and verbal ability; come from high SES families and independent schools; discuss job prospects with their parents; are introverted; and do not rate their chances of success highly.

Male Stayers: These are likely to be students who achieve lower grades; do not conform to school values; are not influenced by their teachers; share high academic achievement motivation; possess high organisational skills and verbal ability; come from high SES families and attend independent schools; discuss job prospects with parents; are extroverted, self-interested, fatalistic and rate their chances of success highly.

Female Leavers: These are likely to be students who achieve higher grades; conform to school values; are influenced by their teachers; have low academic achievement motivation; display poor organisational skills and low verbal ability; come from low SES families and state or technical schools; do not frequently discuss their job prospects with parents; are introverted; and do not rate their chances of success highly.

Male Leavers: These are likely to be students who achieve lower grades; do not conform to school values; are not influenced by their teachers; have low academic achievement motivation; display poor organisational skills; have low verbal ability; come from low SES families and attend government high or technical schools; do not discuss their job prospects with parents; are extroverted, self-interested and fatalistic and yet rate their chances of success highly.

Summary and Discussion

The three parts of this study of the school leaving process highlight a number of variables relating to school, home attitudinal, vocational, personality and ability areas which differentiate school leavers from school stayers. In addition, they reveal interesting sex differences in the staying and leaving process.

Students who became early leavers generally were not academically motivated, lacked organisational skills, came from lower socio-economic backgrounds, had poor verbal ability and rarely discussed their future job plans with parents.

Male and female students, whether stayers or leavers, could be clearly differentiated on a number of school compliance and self dimensions. In the present study, female adolescents achieved good grades and tended to be conforming and more influenced by teachers. Males, on the other hand, were more extroverted, self-interested, fatalistic, more likely to rate their chances of success highly, less conventional and conforming in their attitudes to school.

The profiles of the four criterion groups point to a number of interesting questions involved in the leaving process. Why is it, for example, that female stayers who are succeeding at school rate their chances of success in life so low? Why do the female leavers, despite achieving reasonable school grades, decide to leave school early? Why do male stayers stay on at school despite lower grades and a non-conforming attitude to school values? In spite of poor grades and little commitment to school, how is it that male leavers rate their chance of success in life as fairly high?

Overlaying individual ability, values and commitment to schooling appear to be factors such as socio-economic status, school type, and frequency of job discussions with parents. This suggests that a major dimension of the school staying or leaving process is the congruency between individual abilities, values and expectations and the value climates of home and school. Whether this congruence extends beyond a values-attitudinal dimension to a school and home resource dimension is not clear from the data but is a possiblity worth entertaining, i.e. is there a meshing of resources and values (home and school) operating to underpin individual values and motivations for stayers but not leavers - for males but not females?

Other than socio-economic contextual type factors operating at home and at school, there is quite clearly a sex socialisation factor evident in relation to self rated chances of success in school and life. Why do girls (stayers and leavers, achievers and non-achievers) rate their chances of success so low? Have their expectations of success been lowered by school-based feedback or by family and community attitudes?

Why are females less self-interested and more introverted than males? Has this been the result of earlier socialisation or is it the result of school socialisation process?

Certainly the conformity of girls to the school value system is marked, suggesting a school socialisation process has helped shape their patterns of behaviour and expectations. Why are girls more influenced by teachers than are boys regardless of whether the girls are stayers or leavers? Again this suggests a school socialisation process operating successfully through teachers. Why, however, is the process of socialisation to school conforming values and attitudes more successful with girls than with boys? Is it that again family and school socialisation processes are mutually supportive in shaping girls to be compliant, introverted and less self interested? Is it that a different set of family, school and community expectations are constructed for boys, whereby boys are encouraged to be non-conforming, self interested, extroverted, and more fatalistic? Certainly the data suggest a cluster of sex-role socialisation factors being fostered or extended through the process of schooling.

An interesting issue also concerns the lower grade achievement levels of boys. Girls despite higher grades, higher optimism and conforming attitudes to school values do not construct for themselves images of their own success. Yet boys perceive success for themselves, despite their achievement levels. This suggests a set of sex-linked dimensions of cultural or societal expectations overlaying individual attainments, motivations and expectations. Boys expect to get on in life, despite school grades. Girls, despite their school grades, do not rate their chances of success too highly.

To summarise, the results of the discriminant function analysis in this study highlight two sets of cultures operating within schools - a staying or leaving culture, and a sex based culture. Clearly stayers and leavers display different commitments to schooling and planning their future jobs in conjunction with their families. Likewise in the same school contexts, male and female students show evidence of different expectation cluster for self and for school and life based success. This suggests an inter-play between clusters of sex-role socialisation processes and school socialisation processes. The cultural expectations for boys and girls are doubtless constructed at home and reinforced at school. These expectations then form a complex overlay on individual ability, motivations, commitments, values and self-constructions and produce very different grids for boys and girls, regardless of success feedback via grade achievement levels.

In terms of a transition from school to work, or from adolescence to adulthood, staying or leaving early becomes an important factor affecting future life chances and transitions in both males and females. While congruency of goals between home, school and society may work well for some groups of adolescents in this period of decision making and transition it does not for all.

To create opportunities for more students to mesh their own aspirations, values, and expectations with a supportive environment (home and school based) will necessitate, as a first measure at least, building up the self-confidence of girls through the process of schooling. To help male and female leavers, schools will need to address a variety of motivational, organisational, and value dimensions before a higher commitment to schooling can be achieved. Whatever the process of schooling involved socio-economic variables intrude - in the form of 'cultural

capital' or mere resource provision at home and at school. How such factors can be made to work to the advantage of adolescents from all social classes is a political question, but unfortunately does not, particularly in the current context of economic cutbacks in education, lend itself to educational solutions. Nonetheless such factors influence the life aspirations, and expectations of all school stayers and leavers, regardless of sex, ability and motivation, and to that extent must continue to engage the attention of educators.

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